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U.S. Says Soviet Survey Plane Is Aiding Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON, June 11 — The White House said today that a Soviet reconnaissance plane based in Nicaragua had been flying missions over that country to help the Government there.

"This is the first time that a Soviet photoreconnaissance aircraft has been based in Nicaragua," said Edward P. Djerejian, a White House spokesman.

He said the plane carried "Soviet Aeroflot markings and presumably is being flown by Soviet pilots."

Administration officials expressed certainty that the plane's crew was largely or entirely Russian.

The announcement came hours after the Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, told about two dozen legislators that the Soviet Union was now sending the aircraft over Nicaragua to help the Sandinistas in gathering information and intelligence.

Administration officials said subsequently that the plane, an Antonov AN-30 reconnaissance aircraft, was assisting Managua in its war against United States-supported rebels.

The disclosure comes about two weeks before the House of Representatives plans to take up the Administration's request for \$100 million in aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras. The President is seeking \$70 million in military aid and about \$30 million for nonmilitary purposes.

In recent days, the White House has

stepped up its efforts to gather Congressional support for the measure, amid warnings of stepped up Soviet involvement in Nicaragua. Over the weekend, Administration officials said that the Soviet Union had resumed direct arms shipments to Managua and that a sizable cache of military supplies had been delivered by a Soviet freighter to Nicaragua in early May.

The disclosure today seemed designed to buttress the Administration's case in favor of aid to the rebels.

Officials said President Reagan was scheduled to make the announcement tonight at his nationally broadcast news conference, but was unwittingly upstaged by Mr. Casey. After the C.I.A. Director told the legislators in the afternoon, several of the Congressmen who had attended the briefing discussed the comments with reporters, who then sought out clarification from the White House. Late today, the White House issued its statement.

Mr. Djerejian said: "A Soviet AN-30 photo reconnaissance aircraft has been recently identified in Nicaragua. The aircraft was seen at Sandino International Airport in early May 1986."

"The aircraft carries Soviet Aeroflot markings and presumably is being flown by Soviet pilots," Mr. Djerejian said. "This is the first time that a Soviet photo reconnaissance aircraft has been based in Nicaragua. Such aircraft are capable of both photo reconnaissance and photo mapping operations. Both such missions would be of assistance to the Sandinistas in their counterinsurgency operations. The plane has flown four missions since it has been to Nicaragua."

Responding to a question, Mr. Djerejian said the aircraft "obviously gives the Sandinistas an enhanced capability to fight the resistance."

The Antonov AN-30 generally carries a crew of five as well as two photographer-surveyors. The range of the plane, which is the first specialized aerial survey craft produced in the Soviet Union, is 1,634 miles, according to Jane's All the World's Aircraft.

Mr. Casey made the initial disclosure about the Soviet plane to legislative supporters of contra aid at a White House meeting that was attended by Mr. Reagan and Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

At the end of the meeting, a White House official said, several legislators asked Mr. Casey if the information was declassified. At that point, the C.I.A. Director turned to the White House national security adviser, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, and asked him. Admiral Poindexter, in turn, said the information was declassified.

Representative E. Thomas Coleman, Republican of Missouri, quoted Mr. Casey as saying that "for the first time we have seen Soviet intelligence gathering flights over Nicaragua."

The legislator said, "Obviously they are there to aid the Sandinista forces, and flying support for them."